ECLECTIC APPROACH IN WRITING PEDAGOGY

Zhao Shuo
Northwestern Polytechnical University Xi’an, China

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines an eclectic approach to teaching English writing to Chinese university students. It attempts to address the major problems of college English writing: a heavy emphasis on linguistic accuracy; overlooking the development of students’ writing ability; over-emphasis on the “product”; a lack of input of genre knowledge; and a lack of variety of assessment. Based on the discussion of current approaches to teaching writing, suggestions are made to improve Chinese college English writing instruction as well as enhance effective learning, implementing diverse types of feedback, extending genre-variety, process writing practice and balancing forms and language use.

Introduction

This paper aims to provide fresh perspectives on Chinese college English writing classrooms. To achieve this objective, it firstly identifies four major problems of teaching English writing in Chinese universities. Secondly, it reviews the literature on recent strands of writing instructions – the process approach and the genre approach. Based on the benefits and drawbacks of the two approaches, the genre process approach is recommended as an eclectic approach to Chinese English writing instruction in universities. Finally, three suggestions for the process genre approach are put forward to implement in Chinese college English writing classes.

Research Background

It can be found that pure eclecticism in language teaching is not convincing and principled eclecticism is needed. So it is partially such argumentation that generated the study of principled eclecticism. The origin of principled eclecticism in language writing is not as old-fashioned as it was thought to be. Research on principled eclecticism was appended to research on eclectic approaches in second/foreign language writing instead of being studied as an independent topic until the term “principled eclecticism” was seen in works by Larsen-Freeman (2000:269-271). Mellow (2000) has used the term “principled eclecticism” to describe the “desirable, coherent, and pluralistic” approach, which involves the use of a variety
of language writing activities as required by learner needs and styles. According to Mellow, the eclectic approach has been given a variety of names:

- effective or successful eclecticism
- enlightened eclecticism
- informed or well-informed eclecticism
- integrative eclecticism
- new eclecticism
- planned eclecticism
- systematic eclecticism
- technical eclecticism, etc.

It is called "disciplined eclecticism" by Rodgers (2001), according to whom this approach is "likely to shape the eclectic approach of second languages in the next decades of the new millennium". The fact that it has many names testifies to the influence and popularity of this theory.

To achieve the goal of principled eclecticism, Mellow (2000) proposes principles for categorizing, selecting, and sequencing teaching/learning activities. Activities are categorized in relation to the intersection of the dimensions of language writing. Language is categorized as form or function. Writing is categorized as construction or growth, which is characterized as "contextualized attention to signs".

Identifying Problems of College English Writing in China

Emphasis on Linguistic Accuracy
Writing instruction in China is carried out under the authority of a nationally unified syllabus and the CET examination system. The Chinese College English Syllabus and the CET syllabus highly value correct linguistic forms instead of students' development of creative thought. The desire for high CET pass rates among universities places English teachers in a dilemma. Under immense pressure, English teachers must focus on teaching correct language forms and test-oriented skills rather than helping students develop their creative thinking and language skills for communicative purposes. In the CET, students are required to write a three-paragraph essay based on three topic sentences written in Chinese. This controlled writing format hinders teachers in trying new approaches to writing instruction. Teacher feedback focuses more on grammatical and lexical errors instead of meaning-oriented exploration. In brief students are mainly evaluated on their test scores.
Over-emphasis on the “Product”
Writing is a complicated recursive process instead of a linear one whereby writers are supposed to go back and forth when they compose. In spite of the great influence of alternative Western approaches to the teaching of writing, many language teachers still adopt the product approach in the writing class. Writing tasks are presented in a decontextualized way, neglecting the context and audience. They tend to serve a text-oriented purpose rather than a communicative one. In the Chinese context, the product approach, for many years, has been the dominant mode of instruction in Chinese university writing classes, highlighting the learner’s final piece of work instead of how it is produced. This has various consequences. Firstly, writing quality is judged on the basis of the final product and grammatical and linguistic accuracy. Furthermore, due to this product focus, students pay little attention to the whole process of writing since they know little about how to generate ideas for writing. Consequently, they struggle with text organization, independent thinking and generation of ideas.

Lack of Input of Genre Knowledge
The notion of genre is defined as socially recognized ways of using language, which are purposeful communicative activities employed by members of a particular discourse community. In China, for non-English major students, the four language skills are taught in one class. Due to this CET-oriented writing format, writing instruction mainly centers on three types of texts: narrative, argumentative and expository. Students know little about other genre-specific conventions and contexts in which these genres are used. For instance non-English major students in Chinese universities know little about how to write an appropriate job application letter, a resume or an invitation. However, writing is not purely an individual act but a social and communicative one (Mesana-Alais, 2004:44-57). Since language occurs in particular social cultural contexts, written production needs to consider the social and cultural context as well as the intended audience. Writers use different text types to accomplish different purposes and to fulfill certain social functions. As a consequence, writing classes need to help students understand the social functions of multiple genres and how language creates meaning in different social cultural contexts.

Overlooking the Development of Writing Ability
Although writing plays an indispensable role in the four basic language skills, it has long been ignored in Chinese universities. According to the national syllabus, reading ability is still regarded as the most important skill. Compared with the other
three skills, writing is considered too complicated to teach or not important enough to teach in the class. It also points out that writing occupies a lower position in Chinese university English classrooms and remains the weak point of university students. As a result, this reading-dominated principle brings about negative feedback from the workplace where there are many complaints about graduates’ lack of competence in their writing skills.

Literature Review

The Genre Approach
The genre approach shows a powerful response to the deficit of process models. In contrast to process approaches, genre-based approaches view writing as a social and cultural practice. This involves not simply activities in a writing process, but also the purpose of writing, the context where the writing occurs and the conventions of the target discourse community (Reppen, 2002:321-326). In this sense, relevant genre knowledge needs to be taught explicitly in the language classroom. The philosophy behind effective writing implies that writers not only write of their own choice, but also in different contexts, for different purposes, and in different ways. The genre approach to teaching writing emphasizes the teaching of particular genres students need for later social communicative success. The focus could be the language and discourse features of particular texts and the context in which the text is used. With direct instruction of particular text features, students can better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose. However, there are still possible limitations to consider. Genre knowledge includes both textual knowledge and social and cultural knowledge. Therefore identification of the exact knowledge is a difficult task. Teachers, especially non-native speakers in EFL contexts, might lack the knowledge of some genres themselves. Further argument concerns the learners’ passive performance in the process of modeling the given text. It also claims that a genre approach over-focuses on the reader while paying less attention to learner expression (Swales, 2000). The emergence of genre theory does not attempt to replace or suggest abandoning the process approach to writing, but draws on the demand for a more balanced approach to teaching ESL/EFL writing.

The Process Approach
The process approach, based on criticism of the product approach, originated in L1 writing instruction in English-speaking countries. Until the 1980s it gained great popularity in the ESL (English as Second Language)/EFL profession. The concept
of this approach sees writing as "a complicated cognitive process" and "involves multiple stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing (Zeng, 2005:66-70). It emphasizes the stages of the writing process as well as the writer's individual and independent production. Importantly, it examines how writers create ideas, compose them, and then revise them in order to generate a text. Teachers in the process of writing classroom plan activities which help students understand that writing by its nature is a process. They also need to guide students through the writing process and help them develop effective writing strategies. The major elements of the process approach are students' awareness and teacher intervention, the former referring to the consciousness of the nature of writing as a process, and the latter the teacher-student and student-student relationships. Teachers in the process classroom should leave learners ample free space to express their own personal meanings. To aid this sense of free space, various types of feedback are adopted for revision including peer review and teacher-student conferences (Zhang, 2006:24-28).

Although it was considered the most successful (approach) in the history of pedagogical reform in the teaching of writing, it has drawbacks. It ignores the variety and differentiation of the process of writing in particular social contexts and the fact that certain texts are produced for specific communication purposes. It also highlights limitations of the process approach from the social perspective, claiming that writers are considered to be isolated individuals who are free to write their own ideas. The process model shows how they write, but it does not explain why they make certain linguistic rhetoric choices. Since the structure of target genres is not taught explicitly in the process classroom, ESL/EFL students could possibly fail to produce contextually appropriate texts.

**Process Genre Approach to Teaching Writing**

Considering the limitations of both disciplines, the process genre approach characterizes not only the learner's creative thinking and the act of how writers form a text, but also the knowledge of linguistic features as well as a specific discourse community where a particular genre performs.

A process genre approach, as the term suggests, combines process models with genre theories. The concept not only draws on ideas from genre approaches, such as knowledge of context, the purpose of writing, certain text features, but retains part of process philosophy such as writing skill development and learner response. In this approach, teachers should provide a situation for learners to identify the purpose and mode (a spoken or written text), field (particular topic), and tenor (intended reader) of the writing. With adequate support, learners can use appropriate writing skills to complete their text. In brief, it provides learners with opportunities
for developing their individual creativity as well as helping them fully understand the features of target genres.

Implications
In response to the major problems of college English writing instruction in China, two suggestions are presented based on the genre process approach to writing instruction. Due to the various EFL teaching contexts in Chinese universities, no definite model of teaching writing is provided but suggestions are addressed to a number of related aspects.

Genre-variety Process Writing Practice
The practice of the process concept includes three stages. In the pre-writing stage, teachers are supposed to help students generate ideas through brainstorming, reading materials and group discussion. Based on the collected ideas in the pre-writing stage, students are encouraged to make their first draft and express their ideas freely. When the draft is completed, students are advised to revise their draft alone or in peer groups. At this stage, the transformation of the writer-reader role provides students with the opportunity to judge their writing from the perspective of the audience. With the feedback from the teacher and their peers, students should then be ready for their final drafts.

As previously mentioned, due to the current writing practice employed in the classroom, Chinese college students may exhibit inadequate knowledge about various text types in their later workplace practice. Since no prediction can be made about the range of genres students will be exposed to in post-college social communication, teachers should raise learners’ awareness of a variety of genres in addition to the three traditional writing practice categories of narration, exposition and argumentation. Teachers also need to guide students to discover how genres differ from one another and how the same genre may vary in different social cultural settings. The model includes three stages: modeling, joint construction and independent construction of the text. In the modeling stage, first of all, a particular genre is provided. Based on the teacher’s direct instruction, the text features, context and language of this genre are discussed and analyzed. The focus in this model is form and function of the genre as well as the process of writing a text. After students have gathered knowledge about genres and the writing process, they are then asked to produce a similar text in loose collaboration with their teacher. In the independent construction stage, learners finish their first draft, and then embark upon peer review, self-editing and teacher-student conferencing, finally constructing their own final “product” with confidence. This teaching learning cycle may help
Chinese students in the stages of writing processes and also to understand the way language is used contextually to express meaning.

**Balancing Form and Language Use**

Over-emphasis on linguistic accuracy and grammatical rules in Chinese university writing classes calls for a more balanced writing instruction between form and the use of language in relation to its' particular context. A genre-based view of grammar focuses on language at the level of the whole text and how meaning is conveyed through grammar and vocabulary. As a whole, it examines language through the three levels: at text level, sentence level and word level. While concerns on sentence level are necessary, it is also necessary to analyze the writing from the level of the whole text. Learners also need to recognize the relationship between the language forms and how they express appropriate meaning. Therefore, Chinese college English teachers should help their students understand forms and grammatical rules, and additionally, the relation to their function in context.

Another alternative style of feedback that may be applied to the Chinese English writing classroom is teacher-student conferencing, which refers to face-to-face conversation between the student and the teacher. The advantage here is that it enhances the teacher-student negotiated interaction through face-to-face talk, compared to the traditional teacher written feedback.

**Diverse Types of Feedback**

In Chinese contexts, students prefer receiving written feedback from their teachers since they tend to feel uncomfortable when asked to judge and evaluate their peers' writings. But empirical research among non-English majors in a Chinese university shows that the advantages of peer review far outweigh the disadvantages. Peer groups give students a sense of audience and help them understand that they are not writing for themselves but for readers. It also raises students' awareness of writing as a complex process and offers them the opportunity to analyze writing. One recommendation in addressing this contrast between research and the realities of student preference would be to make peer feedback more meaningful and productive. To do this, it is crucial for Chinese English teachers to prepare students to participate in peer feedback actively. Clear instructions on what to look for in peers' compositions and how to look for it should be provided in order for students to help each other. Due to the large English classes and teachers' heavy workload, self-assessment is also an essential part of the writing process. A self-report checklist would help to promote learners' motivation; raise consciousness of writing skills and strategies; and strengthen their positive attitude towards writing. Chinese
students can also be taught to be self-sufficient editors through a three-step process in which the first stage is to convince students of the necessity of being a good self-editor. The second focuses on training students to recognize major error types. At this stage, teachers need to select those frequent and global errors as well as give input on major error patterns, not individual ones. Thus students may become more conscious of similar problems in their own writing. The third stage is one in which teachers could also encourage students to do journal writing, or free writing with the emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy. Before free writing, teachers need to introduce the basic skills of grouping ideas and clarifying the writing format. As a note of warning, though, for EFL Chinese learners, free writing should be carried out under the teacher’s guidance because EFL Chinese students may not know that for different genres, the format varies. Therefore, in order to make an acceptable draft, learners need to understand how to start writing, what to write about and how to write well.

**Conclusions**

Teachers need to scaffold learning through the explicit instruction of genre knowledge in order that learners can understand certain text features and contexts to be able to finally produce their own texts independently. Diverse types of feedback are recommended to help students become more active writers. Besides teacher written feedback, alternative feedback could be introduced into the writing classroom, such as self-assessment, peer group feedback and student-teacher conferencing. Balancing form and language use can help learners understand how a particular form functions in a particular context. In this way, the current English writing situation in Chinese universities can be improved and Chinese learners’ writing proficiency can be enhanced.
References


